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Two Personal Names in Recently Found Anglo-Saxon Runic Inscriptions: Sedgeford (Norfolk) and Elsted (West Sussex)

Abstract: In 2017 two objects carrying runic inscriptions that are identifiable as personal names were found. Both date to the ninth century; both are dithematic (compound) names. The object, identified as a spoon or fork handle from Sedgeford in Norfolk, bears a familiar male name, *Biarnferð*. This contains a runic graph hitherto unseen, which may, despite the provenance of the find, be interpreted as a representation of the diphthong *ia* that developed in the Kentish dialect by the middle of the ninth century. There is in fact a historically known individual of this name who witnessed a series of Canterbury charters in the mid-ninth century. The other object, a strap-end from Elsted in West Sussex, carries what can be identified from its final element, *-flǣd,* as a female name, although the whole name cannot be read. What is legible cannot be identified with any previously recorded personal name. Evaluation of these finds emphasizes how Anglo-Saxon runic writing practice continued to adapt to changes in the language and the regularization of roman-script literacy in the ninth century. Finally, the role of literacy within a nexus of cultural relationship involving individuals and artefacts is also highlighted.

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1   Two New Runic Finds

Early in 2017, two objects came to light which are inscribed with short sequences of Anglo-Saxon runes that can be identified as individual personal names. Both are datable to the ninth century: one around the middle of that century and the other in its second half. Both inscriptions are therefore from relatively late in the period when the use of this script in England can be shown to have been relatively common. From the tenth and eleventh centuries we have a number of Norse-language inscriptions in Scandinavian runes, while the preservation of the Anglo-Saxon runic tradition appears to have become confined to learned, and hence ecclesiastical, contexts (Hines 2019). Any additional evidence of literacy from Anglo-Saxon England will always be welcome, but it might initially seem unlikely that two new attestations of personal names should merit particular attention – one of them, indeed, a common name, with seventeen attestations suggested in the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* database (PASE s.n. *Beornfrith*) and fourteen in W. G. Searle's *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (Searle 1897: 99). In these cases, however, in the fields of both onomastics and literary dialectology, the newly found specimens have quite remarkable implications.

2 A Spoon or Fork Handle from Sedgeford, Norfolk

2.1 The Find-Place

The Sedgeford inscription, on a carefully shaped and ornamented strip of copper alloy (Figure 1a), was found in the course of permitted metal-detecting in an area adjacent to the site of long-term research excavations on and around a Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon settlement at Sedgeford in the north-west corner of Norfolk (Figure 1d) (SHARP; Faulkner et al. 2014; PAS: NMS-2DC05C). Building upon the results of some earlier excavations and finds, a programme of field research has been conducted since 1997 by the *Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project* (SHARP). This has identified a substantial Middle Anglo-Saxon cemetery known as the 'Boneyard' that was in use from the late seventh or early eighth century through the early to mid-ninth century, adjacent to an extensive range of buildings which represent at least three primary phases of re-organization and restructuring of the settlement. The earliest residential features identified were contemporary with the 'Boneyard' burial ground but continue on through the tenth century, after the known burial ground had apparently gone out of use. The field adjacent to the excavated area in which in the inscribed object was found is also reported to have produced pottery contemporary to that found in the excavations (pers. comm., Andrew Rogerson).

2.2 The Inscribed Object

The inscribed metal strip is slightly more than 87mm in length and varies in width from 6.5–10mm. It is about 1.5mm thick and so quite robust. At one end (arrowed in Figure 1a) there is a marked change in surface coloration on both sides, which is typical of areas of solder where this strip was once attached to another section of a composite artefact – a separate piece which indeed we may hope may itself eventually be found in the area. The other end of the strip from this soldered segment has a neatly shaped, slightly expanded terminal, its outline enhanced with an incised framing line. An oval panel containing a bas-relief pattern of linear interlace measuring c. 12 x 10mm (Figure 1b) lies between this terminal and incised shaft of the strip. That inscribed area also has incised framing lines, which concurrently form the upper and lower borders of the line of runic script (Figure 1c).

This object is of particular archaeological interest in its own right. The fact that there was previously a further attached section at one end of the strip, now lost, suggests that it had served as the handle of some composite artefact. A highly plausible functional identification is that it has come from a specimen of the kind of relatively rare spatula-spoons, or even rarer forks, represented in practical terms uniquely by the well-decorated and closely dated silver spoon and fork 'set' from Sevington, Wiltshire, found in the late 1830s and acquired by the British Museum (accession number 1888.7–19.88) nearly fifty years later (Figure 2a; Wilson 1964: 167–169, nos. 67–88; cf. Hinton 1996: 55–57). These artefacts were found together with a considerable hoard of some seventy silver coins (Blunt 1972). The complete and therefore precise numismatic composition of the Sevington hoard is regrettably lost to us, but it included coins of Kings Coenwulf, Ceolwulf II and Berthwulf of Mercia (AD 796–821, 821–823, and 840–852 respectively), Kings Egbert and Æthelwulf of Wessex (AD 802–839 and 839–858 respectively), and King Æthelstan of East Anglia (c. AD 827–850), besides Wulfred and Ceolnoth, Archbishops of Canterbury (AD 805–832 and 833–870 respectively). In all cases, as one would expect, the later rulers in the sequences are represented by the larger number of

coins. Together, the evidence clearly indicates deposition of the hoard no earlier than the 840s, while the absence of later issues shows that it cannot post-date the mid-850s. The numismatist C. E. Blunt (1972) was satisfied with a dating of the deposit to c. AD 850.

Figure 1: The Sedgeford handle. a: The object itself, scale 1:1; b: interpretative drawing of the carved interlace ornament in the central roundel, scale 3:1; c: the runic inscription, scale 3:1; d: location map. Photographs a and c, courtesy of the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (PAS), kindly supplied by Andrew Rogerson; b and d, drawn by the author.

Figure 2: The Sevington spoon/spatula and fork. a: The objects themselves, scale 1:2; b–c: detailed photographs of the bowl of the spoon and the central roundel, showing the incised interlace ornament and animal head terminals where the shafts are joined, scale 3:1. Photographs, the author, reproduced by kind permission of the trustees of the British Museum.

The Sevington spatula and fork are manifestly matched with one another in design, but differ curiously in detail, execution, and above all in size, with the fork being more than 16mm shorter than the spatula. One must consequently hesitate to identify them as a cutlery set that had been manufactured as one. The spatula is constructed of three rounded plates soldered or welded together with two flat bars to form the length of the object, and the joints between the elongated bars and the rounded plates have been thickened for reinforcement with mouldings in the form of stylized human masks or animal heads (e.g. Figure 2b–c). The central roundel on the spatula is closely comparable in its form and interlace design to the oval field of the Sedgeford handle, although the interlace ribbonwork here appears to have zoomorphic features as well (Figure 2c). By contrast, the Sevington fork has only a plain rhomboidal plate as the central segment. Incised zoomorphic motifs that are now very faint can also be made out along the shafts of the spatula, but nowhere on the fork.

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2.3   Analysis and Interpretation of the Inscription

The sequence of eight runes on the Sedgeford fragment running away from the area of solder towards the terminal is preceded by a carefully incised cross with flaring arms. The runic graphs are perfectly clear in terms of how they are composed and shaped, with minimal damage to obscure the text. One of the runes, however, is a form previously unknown. The inscription can immediately be read as **+ b ? r n f e r þ**, and we need have no hesitation in identifying this with the masculine personal name which in normalized (West Saxon) Old English would be *Beornferþ*, a derivative form of an earlier *Beornfriþ*. There is nothing unusual or remarkable about the forms of the six instantly recognizable runes that spell out this name (Waxenberger 2017: 629).

The second rune in the inscribed sequence is clearly cut but unusually formed. It has a full-length vertical stave with two by-staves to the right in the form of confronted, asymmetrical chevrons which join the main stave at a single point about half-way up (Figure 3). The outer arms of the by-staves are shorter than the inner ones, which they meet at around three-quarters of the length away from the main stave. Consequently these outer arms do not meet one another at the right-hand extremity of the rune to form a box; indeed they do not extend the width of the rune beyond that reached by the principal arms.

Figure 3: Interpretative drawing of rune no. 2 on the Sedgeford handle, as incised. Scale 5:1. Drawn by the author.

Waxenberger (2017: 636–638) put forward what she grouped as three principal alternative 'scenarios' to explain this enigmatic rune-form, although in practice these represent four different hypotheses which she regarded as plausible: (1) that what was inscribed here is simply an uncancelled carver's error; (2a) that the graph is a bind-rune representing $\widehat{io}$; (2b) that the graph is a hitherto unparalleled form of the **y** rune; or (3) that the graph is entirely new rune for **eo**.[1] As the **o** rune known by name as *ōs*, after the very earliest period of Anglo-Saxon runic orthography at least, itself has a vertical main stave and two chevrons to the right, albeit parallel rather than confronted, there is some structural basis for proposing that these graphemic features could be recomposed to form a new grapheme, as that in Figure 3, for a diphthong containing the phonetic feature *o*. The known **y** rune from the mid-eighth century onwards includes a single acute angle which just might be reproduced in the form seen at Sedgeford, but there is no perceptible purpose in such an innovation, while the name-form *Byrnferð* is a rare, primarily Late West Saxon variant, recorded mostly in the second half of the tenth century and thus highly unlikely to be represented on this object. In any of these cases, we can also argue that the form of the rune itself does not obviously evoke identification of the grapheme with any of the phonemes *eo*, *io* or *y*. A contemporary reader would have been required – as

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[1] Following convention, runic graphs transliterated into equivalent roman-script letters are given in bold. A slur over two or more consecutive runes represents a ligature, or 'bind-rune', while a slur below two consecutive vowel graphs denotes a diphthong represented by a single rune.

we as modern scholars have had to do – to recognize the name first, and then to deduce what the unfamiliar rune was intended to represent.
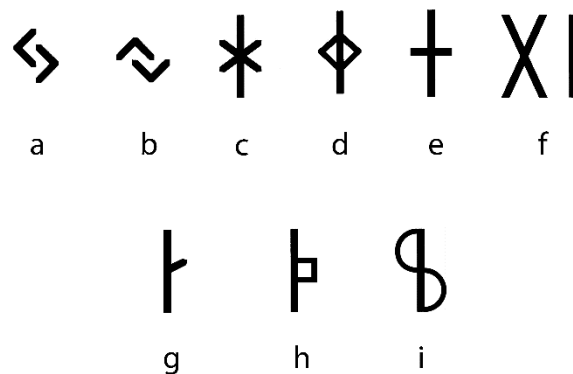
Figure 4: The **jāra* rune: variants, derivatives and comparanda. a–b: The original forms of the rune; c: the star-rune, given the name *iar* or *ior* in some Anglo-Saxon *fuþorcs*; d: the *ger* rune; e: the form of the rune in the Thames scramasax *fuþorc*; f: the standard Anglo-Saxon runes **g** and **i**; g–i: runic forms on the Rök stone, Östergötland, Sweden. g: short-twig **a** as it usually appears on the stone; h: the derivative of the **jāra* rune used to represent **a**; i: the derivative of the **jāra* rune used to represent **i**.

Waxenberger (2017: 637) explicitly rejects a further possibility, that the 'new' rune on the Sedgeford handle could represent the **jāra* rune of the original *fuþark* on the grounds that a phoneme /j/ would make no sense at this point of this sequence. There is, however, a particularly interesting and, it may be claimed, strong case for explaining the Sedgeford grapheme on precisely this runographic basis. Formally, the **jāra* rune representing the semi-vowel /j/ appears initially to have been composed, quite uniquely, of a pair of separate but confronted chevrons (Figures 4a–b). It is recorded in a range of variant forms: "No rune in the older *futhark* has a more complicated history than the *j*-rune […]" (Odenstedt 1990: 66–74). In Anglo-Saxon England this rune consistently, albeit infrequently, appears in forms that can be explained through the addition of a vertical main stave to the two chevrons, unifying the graph into a unbroken, continuous symbol: the chevrons are confronted but symmetrical, however, and the main stave runs vertically through the middle of them rather than to one side as in the Sedgeford graph (Figures 4c–d). Most of the known occurrences of these runes are in Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* rune-rows, and all but one of those are in eleventh-century or early twelfth-century scholarly manuscript collections of by then exotic alphabets. The exception is the late eighth- or early ninth-century Brandon (Suffolk) pin-head part-*fuþorc*, where the form appears as in Figure 4c (Tester et al. 2014: 238–240 and 260–263). The Thames 'scramasax' *fuþorc* has a simpler but manifestly related form in which the chevrons have been replaced by a single horizonal bar so that the rune has the form of a tall and narrow cross (Figure 4e; Backhouse et al. 1984: 101–192, no. 94). Where rune-names are given in the manuscript *fuþorcs*, and in Hickes's early eighteenth-century transcription of the Old English Rune Poem, the manuscript exemplar of which was subsequently lost in the Cotton Library fire, this rune has the name *iar* or *ior* (Derolez 1954: 3–52). The rune-form as in Figure 4d is regularly given the name *ger* (see also Page 1999: 63–76, esp. 70 and 75).

The grapheme in Figure 4c, a form that has descriptively been christened the 'star-rune', also appears in a few epigraphical contexts. There are two examples on stone monuments in England itself, which are widely separated geographically and dated to different centuries: one from Thornhill (West Yorkshire), dated to the ninth century (Coatsworth 2008: 258–259), and the other from St Peter's Church, Dover (Kent) dated to the tenth or even the eleventh

century (Tweddle et al. 1995: 143–144). In both cases the runes quite clearly represent word-initial [j-] produced by the palatalization of initial /g/ before the vowel /i/ in dithematic masculine personal names beginning with the element *Gisl-*. A female name which could be transliterated **fajhild**, with the star-rune in third position, which has been found amongst pilgrim graffiti in a catacomb in Rome (Schwab 2006), poses more of a challenge. This has been assigned a date between the late seventh and the end of the eighth century, but it is not clear what the basis of that dating is. Onomastically, the first element in this name is unique for England. Names recorded in the Old High German area include a few with the first element *Fag-*, the root of which is traced also in terms meaning 'joy', 'to enjoy', and appears in Old English in the adjective *fægen* 'joyful' (Förstemann 1900: cols. 493–494 s.n. *Fag*; Kaufmann 1968: 111). Schwab argues alternatively for an otherwise previously unattested form based on the word *fāg* 'bright', 'colourful', as the *āc* rune **a** in second position should represent a back vowel (see also Nedoma 2004: 292–297). If so, the star-rune here uniquely stands for velar [g]. With a Continental-derived personal name *Faghild* we should anticipate a back vowel and a velar consonant; if, conversely, the use of the star-rune still implies a palatalized rather than a velar [g], it should also imply a fronted pronunciation of the root vowel, as [æ] rather than [a].

It has been suggested that this grapheme of the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* is not to be explained as a derivative of the **jāra* rune but rather as a simple bind-rune formed of the standard runes for **g** and **i** (Figure 4f) (von Friesen 1918–1919: 24; Derolez 1987). This does not really affect the analysis and interpretation of the graph in the Sedgeford inscription, which resembles the original **jāra* rune more closely because of the off-centre position of the vertical main stave and consequently the greater salience of the confronted but asymmetrical chevrons. But it is far from implausible that the sheer coincidence in formal and phonetic correspondence between a bind-rune **g͡i** alongside predictable and practical evolutions in the form of the **jāra* rune to the star-rune form does account for the whole range of relevant forms and usages we encounter in Anglo-Saxon runic material, including the Sedgeford inscription.

In Proto-Old Norse, Germanic **jāra* lost the initial *j-* as well as the final *-a* to evolve into standard Old Norse *ár* 'year'; correspondingly, a derived form of the *jāra* rune came to function as the vowel **a** in the Younger Futhark: in the star-rune form in a transitional period of the seventh and eighth centuries AD, represented for instance by the Ribe skull fragment (Barnes 2012: 61; Stoklund 2004), and subsequently in a number of much simpler variants, such as that shown in Figure 4g. On a runestone found at Rök in Östergötland, Sweden, which carries a long and exceptionally enigmatic inscription (most recently, Holmberg 2015), the latter, 'short-twig' variant is most common. However in two marginal lines on Side B of this stone the script is ostentatiously transformed through an extraordinary and virtuoso display of historic runic knowledge, deliberately using the Older Futhark runes **g**, **o**, **d** and maybe **w** too, together with the more traditional form of 'long-twig' **s** rather than the 'short-twig' variant that is regular elsewhere (Holmberg 2015: 74–78), and also inverting the grapho-phonemic character of the Younger Futhark by using voiced consonant graphemes **g** and **d** to represent the voiceless phonemes /k/ and /t/ respectively. Amongst these unexpected runes, two nonce transformations of the **jāra* rune appear regularly, one form representing **a** (Figure 4h) and the other **i** (Figure 4i). Formally, the generation of this **a** variant on the Rök stone can be explained in exactly the same way as the form on the Sedgeford handle (Fischer 2012: esp. 129–130; but cf. Källström 2012: esp. 136–137).

What is proposed here is a fascinatingly parallel creative use of inherited runic graphology in eastern England and eastern Sweden, not a direct connexion or influence between the two areas, nor that the second rune in the Sedgeford inscription should be

transliterated **a**. There is a sound philological case to be made for reading the rune as **ia**. A shift of the diphthong which is normally *eo* in Early Old English to *ia* is considered a definitive characteristic of the Kentish dialect, and is represented especially in a series of charters and a number of other texts from Kent – primarily from Canterbury, inevitably – dated to the third quarter of the ninth century (Campbell 1959: §§ 280, 297). Prior to this horizon and the collection of texts associated with it, Kentish texts, and thus presumably the Kentish dialect, had been characterized by a tendency to have *io* where *eo* would have been expected, suggesting, quite naturally, the raising of the initial element from a mid-height point of articulation [e] to a high one [i]. Hogg noted that the spellings suggest that the long diphthongs *ēo* and *īo*, which existed as the products of the breaking of long vowels *ē* and *ī* before certain consonant groups, merged in *īo* in Kentish, while their short counterparts *eo* and *io* tended to merge as *eo* (Hogg 1992: § 5.160). It is entirely plausible that a subsequent further change was the lowering of the second element of the diphthong from [ɔ] to [ɑ].

The presence of the diphthong *ia* in the Kentish dialect is rather suddenly attested with some frequency from around AD 850. Particularly important are variant spellings amongst the often very inconsistent representations of personal names in the formal documents known collectively as charters. Previously, the political dominance of Kent by the more powerful Mercian kingdom – intermittently the West Saxon kingdom too – meant that Old English orthography even from the principal church centre of Canterbury in Kent was strongly affected by non-Kentish norms. Thus the famous Vespasian Psalter glosses, attributed to Canterbury in the early to mid-ninth century, are nonetheless a key source for the Mercian dialect (Webster and Backhouse 1991: 197–199, no. 153; Breay and Story 2018: 308–309). The extensive and profound ninth-century disruption of the political and cultural infrastructure of Anglo-Saxon England brought about by the Viking raids and conquests appears to have broken down this grammatical hegemony too. It has been debated, for instance, to what extent the appearance of sub-standard written Latin from Canterbury at this time represents simply a decline in standards of literacy and training or the acceptance of a form of de facto colloquial Vulgar Latin there (Brooks 1984: esp. 171–174; Lapidge 1996: 409–454). That would, of course, be fully consistent with the adoption of practices in the spelling of the vernacular to mirror the reality of Kentish pronunciation at the same time.

The Kentish tendency to write the diphthongs which we would expect to have been *eo/ēo* as *io/īo* is well attested before the end of the eighth century. To use the charters issued by Christ Church Canterbury as substantial and appropriate sample, in documents datable up to c. AD 810 there is considerable variation of spellings of personal names where *eo* would be expected, including occasional 'monophthongal' spellings of *e*, *o* and once *y*, but *eo* remains the most common. Between c. AD 810 and c. AD 850 the spelling *eo* is effectively standard, but then *ia* becomes frequent within the markedly inconsistent period from c. 850–875. The name of Archbishop Ceolnoth, for instance, appears as *Ceolnoð*, *Ciolnoð* and *Cialnoð*; even once as *Cealnoð* (Brooks and Kelly 2013: respectively nos. 84 and 93; 91; 81; and 82), while Archdeacon Ceolmund appears as *Ceolmund*, *Ciolmund* and *Cialmund* (*ibid*. nos. 85; 98; 81 respectively). In the case of the first element of the name on the Sedgeford handle, we have *Beorn-* in thirteen names in Christ Church charters of this period, *Biorn-* in seventeen, and *Biarn-* in five (*Biarnfreð* Pr; *Biarnheah* Archd; *Biarnhelm* Ab, Pr; *Biarnmod* Bp*; Biarnnoð*: *ibid*. nos. 82, 85, 86, 88, 89 and 90). Variant spellings can occur in the same texts. The supplementation of earlier <io> spellings with <ia> spellings from the mid-ninth century suggests that in this case the orthographic changes may indeed be direct evidence of the chronology of the sound-change itself. This sort of variation in spelling variation is mirrored, albeit to a minor degree, in contemporary Rochester charters (Campbell 1973). This would

imply that the first element of Old English *eo* was raised to *i* in Kentish no later than the eighth century while the second element unrounded and lowered to *a* by the third quarter of the ninth.

By the Middle English period the Old English falling diphthong *ia* [i̯a] had shifted to a rising diphthong spelt *ya* [i̯a], but it is impossible to pin down the date of that transformation closely (Jordan 1934, §§ 81–82). Common Germanic *eu*, Old English *eo*, also became a rising diphthong *iā* in Old Frisian (Bremmer 2009: §§ 36–38 and 76); again, though, we do not have the evidence to track the stages of that phonetic transformation in precise chronological terms. The hypothesis that the second rune in the Sedgeford inscription might represent a Kentish diphthong *ia* could have useful implications on precisely this point. The rune-name **jāra* developed rather differently across the various dialects of Old English. Having lost the final -*a* in the reconstructed Common West Germanic stage, /ja:r/ would have developed very early on Pre-Old English to **gǣr* /jɛ:r/ and on to /je:r/ by the fronting and subsequent raising of the original root vowel *ā* in most Old English dialects (Campbell 1959: §§ 128–129). The noun thus appears as *gēr* in the non-West Saxon dialects (DOE s.v. *gēar*; cf. the rune-name recorded for the rune-form shown in Figure 4d, as noted above). In West Saxon, however, it diverged, as the [ɛ:] of **gǣr* was not subject to further raising but rather to the subsequent sound-change known as palatal diphthongization, which modified the root vowel to produce *gēar* (Campbell 1959: §§ 185–188; Hogg 1992: §§ 5.49). A simple explanation of the use of this rune for the diphthong in question may therefore be that a sequence of [j-] followed by a mid or low vowel was perceived as sufficiently similar to a falling *ia* diphthong for the effectively obsolete rune to be redeployed in that way. Such a pragmatic hypothesis is neither particularly problematic nor intrinsically controversial.

The manuscript runic alphabet names *iar* and *ior*, however, as derivatives of a historical **jāra*, suggest identification with a rising *ia*, [i̯a]. There is an unresolved debate in Old English philology over whether the language contained some regular rising diphthongs as early as the eighth century and probably before, particularly in contexts where Germanic initial [j-] had been followed by a back vowel (Campbell 1959: §§ 170–183; Hogg 1992: §§15.59–70). The relatively consistent writing of a 'glide' vowel between the initial [j-] (spelt <g->) and the stressed vowel, in for instance the words *geong* 'young', *geoc* 'yoke', *begeonda* 'beyond', and *geāra* 'yore', suggests that such diphthongs could be found in the phonemic inventory by the eighth century. No such development can be postulated for the derivatives of **jāra*, but in fact the argument for a pragmatic application of perceived similarity just presented is arguably even more valid for a Kentish diphthong that already had a rising stress pattern: the identification made would be between a semi-vowel /j/ followed by a stressed low (front) vowel in the rune-name and a fully vocalic /i/ followed by a stressed low back vowel in the phonemic rising diphthong.

What makes the case for identifying the man named in the runes on the Sedgeford handle as a Kentish *Biarnferþ* particularly intriguing is the fact that such a man, of the appropriate date, is named in other historical sources. The series of charters of Christ Church Canterbury (the monastic priory of Canterbury Cathedral), includes a number that were witnessed by a priest of this name (PASE s.n. *Beornfrith* 3). These charters date from a period that could exceed forty years, so that it is possible, although by no means necessary, that more than one priest of the same name is involved. His first appearance seems to be in a charter datable to the period AD 825x832, in which the spelling of the name is unclear at a damaged edge of the witness list (Brooks and Kelly 2013: no. 62). The name then appears as *Beornferd* in 838, *Beornferð* in 843, *Beornfreth* in 844 (in a witness list which also includes a *Bornfreth*), *Bornfrið* in a document datable 843x865 but possibly assignable to 859, *Beornfreð* in

863x867, and finally *Biarnfreð* in 867 (Figure 5; Brooks and Kelly 2013: nos. 68, 73, 74, 84, 88 and 89). If this is one and the same man all the way through, he would, by the 860s, have become a very senior cleric, in terms of age and of service, at Christ Church. The list of names may, of course, be the product of two or more priests of this name having exercised responsible roles in this centre of the Church in England around the mid-ninth century. Of course, too, none of the evidence provides any particular reason why Sedgeford's **biarnferþ** should be the same man as a Christ Church charter witness. But it is undeniably possible that they could actually be the same person.
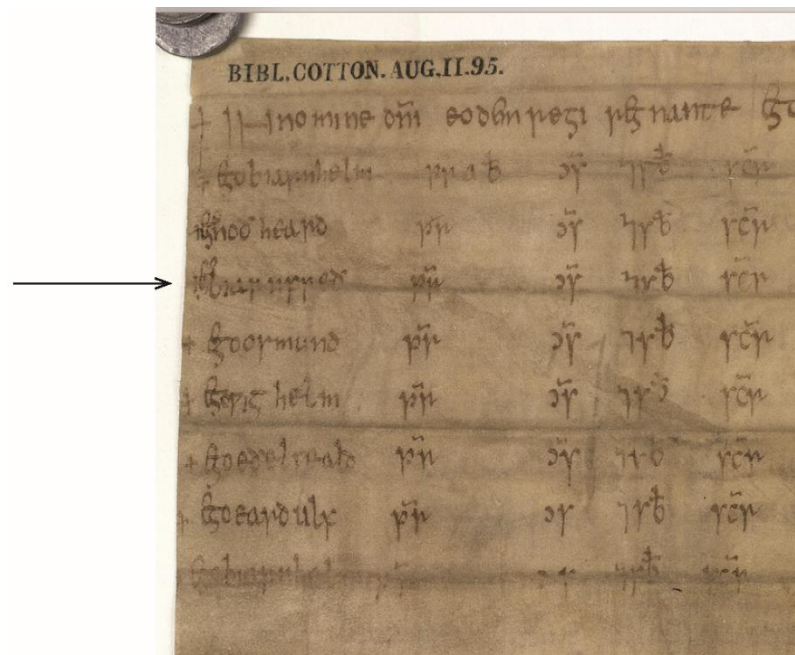

Figure 5: The name *Biarnfreð* in the witness list of charter Sawyer 338 of AD 867, a charter of Æthelræd King of Wessex. London, British Library, Cotton Augustus, II.95. Copyright the British Library, and reproduced by permission.

There are less speculative conclusions to be drawn, and more generally significant ones in terms of the history of Anglo-Saxon literacy if rather more prosaic. The case for identifying the new rune as **ia** is sufficiently well grounded empirically and logically to be more than mere conjecture; nonetheless this is a unique instance, and naturally further examples would help either to corroborate or to correct the inferences drawn. But Kent is not a part of England that is very productive of runic finds, at least not after the Pre-Old English period and the beginning of the Early Old English period in the late seventh century, when the earliest page-gold shillings and sceattas struck with the name **pada** were being produced, probably in Kent, and circulated (Blackburn 1991: esp. 145–154). The St Peter's, Dover, grave slab does, however, testify to an ability to use traditional Anglo-Saxon runes in an entirely competent manner in the tenth or eleventh century there, and it is therefore possible that the Sedgeford handle, with its Kentish dialectal affinity, together with that grave slab, indicate that the restriction but preservation of runic literacy as a scholarly, ecclesiastical script for the vernacular – in this case for personal names – proceeded earlier in Kent than in the surrounding areas of southern and eastern England.

3   A Strap-End from Elsted, West Sussex

3.1   The Inscribed Object

The second object for consideration here is a small and elegant silver strap-end, found by a metal-detector user at Elsted in West Sussex early in January 2017 (Figure 6). It was promptly reported under the *Portable Antiquities Scheme*, to the late David Williams, Finds Liaison Officer for Surrey (PAS: SUR-219F9A). Archaeologically, the item can be identified and classified according to Gabor Thomas's corpus of Late Anglo-Saxon and Viking-period strap-ends from Britain, an unpublished PhD thesis from the Institute of Archaeology, London (Thomas 2000). Thomas's survey records no very close parallels to the Elsted piece, in fact, although it can still confidently be assigned to his Class A Type 1 ('strap-ends of more or less convex outline and a modelled animal head terminal, with Trewhiddle Style ornament on the face'), of which sub-groups xv–xviii are those with foliate ornament, as we see on the face of the Elsted specimen (Thomas 2000: esp. 82–85 and figures 3.9–3.11). The art style places the strap-end in the ninth century. Thomas (2000: 194–199) argues that such foliate ornament is to be dated towards the end of the ninth century rather than earlier. That is an interestingly late date for an artefact inscribed in Anglo-Saxon runes.

The Elsted piece is incomplete and damaged. The split end of the tongue, through which it would have been attached to a strap, has been lost, and this end of the surviving fragment – which is nonetheless the majority of the original item – is greatly abraded. The object has evidently been folded, upper face inwards, across the middle of its surviving length and subsequently evened out again; this has resulted in the loss of a segment of the face of the back over an area of some 5–6mm square. That damage has removed part of the runic inscription. There are also some deep scratch marks, especially on the back. It seems likely that at some stage in its life the strap-end was quite unceremoniously handled, possibly because it had been packed up and prepared for recycling as scrap. If that were the case, it nonetheless survived. The *Portable Antiquities Scheme* database (PAS) does not record any other contemporary metalwork from the same locality.

3.2   Analysis and Interpretation of the Inscription

3.2.1   The Runes

A personal name was inscribed on the rear of the strap-end (Figure 7). A simple cross precedes the lettering, which runs from the narrower terminal end towards the now lost split attached end. The runes were lightly incised and relatively well spaced out. Many of them are rather idiosyncratic in form, and a descriptive account of each one therefore follows. As noted, part of the inscribed surface has been lost, and with it at least one, conceivably two runes. As we have no way of knowing the correct original tally, the runes are numbered for convenience of reference here as 1–6 in the order of the now visible runes.
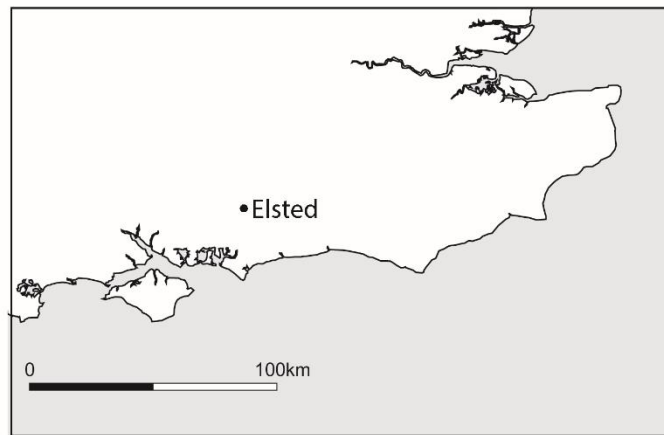
Figure 6: The Elsted strap-end. a: The object itself, scale 3:1; b: location map. Photographs courtesy of the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (PAS), kindly supplied by David Williams; map drawn by the author.
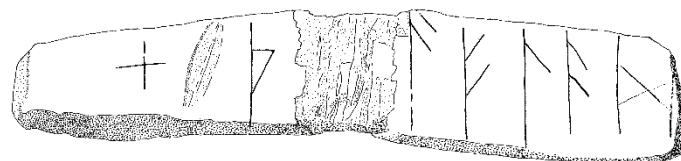

Figure 7: Interpretative drawing of the inscribed back of the Elsted strap-end, showing the cross and runes and the principal areas of surface damage. Scale 4:1. Drawn by the author.

1: þ

The 'pocket' on his rune, formed by the by-staves to the right of the vertical main stave, is quite unusually formed with a horizontal upper line, meeting the main stave at a right angle. This is unparalleled in runic inscriptions; although the form or something extremely like it can occur in manuscript *fuþorcs* (see Derolez 1954, Figure 35) it is exceptional. This shape does, however, represent how the letter *thorn* came to be written in Insular minuscule script. In runic

inscriptions, the form of the pocket here is characteristic of the **w** rune rather than **þ**. However, the position of the pocket around the middle of the main stave rather than at the top is unambiguous, and has to be treated as decisive in graphemic terms. If this rune-form represents palaeographical influence from the roman script tradition on runic writing in England that would concurrently suggest a relatively late date for the inscription within the period of regular use of Anglo-Saxon runes, which is in keeping with Gabor Thomas's preferred late ninth-century date for this form of strap-end itself.

This is followed by the damaged area, and therefore a lacuna in the inscribed text.

2: æ

The vertical main stave and a pair of parallel by-staves angled downwards to the right at its top are quite clear, although the upper by-stave is incomplete. It is not fully determinable whether that is the result of considerable abrasion of this edge through wear or because it was cut too close to the edge and so was imperfect. The possibility of a different reading is noted below (Section 3.2.2).

3: f

This rune, at least, is very clear. Both by-staves are located well down the main stave, which they join at just over 30 per cent and 60 per cent of its length from the top respectively. The lower by-stave rises to the level at which the upper by-stave joins the main stave, and the slightly shorter upper by-stave does not rise to the same level as the top of the main stave.

4: l

The single by-stave angled down to the right of the vertical main stave in this case joins that main stave not at the top, as one would normally expect, but lower down: in fact effectively at the same level as the end of the upper by-stave on 3: **f**. Rune 4: **l** is thus almost identical in form to 2: **æ** to this extent but with no sign of a parallel upper by-stave. The inscribed surface at the top of this rune is damaged, but not so much that we could suggest that there had once been a further by-stave here.

5: æ

In this case, in contrast to 2: **æ**, the by-staves have been cut to join the vertical main stave considerably lower down. The main stave itself appears to have been cut somewhat shorter, at only 82.5 per cent of the length of 2: **æ** and stopping short of the lower edge; it reaches the same level as the other runes at the top edge, however. The length and height of the by-staves are in fact similar to the position of the by-staves in relation to the main stave in rune 3: **f**. Proportionally, the upper by-stave joins the main stave at almost exactly the level as the by-stave of rune 4: **l**, which as noted is parallel to the *lower* by-stave on 2: **æ**. A natural explanation is that the rune-carver, having encountered problems in cutting 2: **æ**, lowered the position of the by-staves on runes 3: **f**, 4: **l** and 5: **æ** for clarity's sake.

6: d

At the abraded end of the surviving artefact, this rune is partially obscured. What is most clearly visible could be a rather broad **c** rune (Figure 8). Under microscopic examination, however, and careful photography with light from various angles, the presence of a full height second vertical stave to the right, and the rising, crossing by-stave between these two main staves, are satisfactorily clear, so that there is no reason to doubt the reading of **d** here.

Figure 8: A broader, angular variant of the Anglo-Saxon **c** rune. Drawn by the author.

3.2.2   The Personal Name

The inscription thus names, or appears to read, **+ þ – æ f l æ d**. We can identify this with confidence as a female name ending in *-flǣd*. That is a familiar final element of dithematic female names in both the Old English and the Old High German onomasticons (Table 1; cf. Förstemann 1900, cols. 508–509, s.n. *Fladi*).

Table 1: A conspectus of attested female names ending in *-flǣd* collated from the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* database (PASE), the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*, and Okasha 2011. *Beorhtflǣd* is recorded only as an element within a place-name.

Ælflǣd	Eadflǣd	Sifflǣd
Æþelflǣd	Ealhflǣd	Stanflǣd
Beorhtflǣd*	Eanflǣd	Sydeflǣd
Byrhflǣd	Heanflǣd	Wihtflǣd
Byrnflǣd	Humflǣd	Wulfflǣd
Ceolflǣd	Lēofflǣd	Wynflǣd
	Sǣflǣd	

At this point, however, we have reached the limit of what we can securely read and identify. There are no recorded Anglo-Saxon female names in *-flǣd* that begin with *Þ-*. The only regular first name element starting in *Þ-* in the onomasticon that could be anticipated here is *Þeod-*, from the feminine noun meaning 'people', 'nation' (Okasha 2011: 64–66). A genitive or dative singular **þēodæ* would have been possible in grammatically regular terms for the first element, but would be a uniquely archaic and fossilized form for the second half of the ninth century if so. But the crucial point against any such reconstruction is the fact that it is not possible to fit a runic sequence **eod** in the space available in the damaged area.

No *Þeodflǣd* is recorded in England, either, although we may note that a Langobardic source of AD 744 includes the name *Teuflada* (Latinized, in the ablative case). The record of a man under the name of *Theabul* as the witness of a charter of Wihtred of Kent datable to AD 700 or 715 (Sawyer 21) may also represent a shortened form of what would standardly have been *Þeodbeald* in Old English, with a reduction in the first element that is paralleled in Continental name-forms, although that of the second element is not so. These do not offer convincing solutions to the challenge posed by the Elsted inscription. The Germanic neuter noun **þaka* 'roof' can also be found as a compound name element (Kaufmann 1968: 344–345[2]), but this feature too is unknown in Anglo-Saxon England, and we would have to postulate the *æ* preceding *-flǣd* purely as an unparalleled svarabhakti/epenthetic vowel in such a case.

What we must admit, then, is that the available evidence offers us no solution to the problem of deciphering the Elsted text fully, even in a conjectural way. We therefore have to consider whether other readings might be justified. The recorded names in *-flǣd* from Anglo-

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[2] My thanks to Robert Nedoma for drawing this to my attention.

Saxon England are listed above in Table 1. The most common of these are *Ælfflæd* and *Æþelflæd*. We can reconsider the possibility that what has been read as initial **þ** in this name might instead be an untypically formed **w**. That, however, is not only a forced interpretation of the grapheme present, but again practically impossible to reconcile with the presence of rune 2: **æ**. The one conceivable solution based upon an emended reading is that the inscription would originally have read, or have been intended to read [**æ**]**þ**[**e**]**lflæd**. This would require us to postulate a lost **æ** before rune 1: **þ**, and that what is read above as rune 2: **æ** was in fact intended to be an **l** rune. There is indeed space for **æ** between the cross and 1: **þ**, and definitely so for an **e** rune in the damaged area after 1: **þ**. Before 1: **þ** the surface is in fact quite damaged, albeit with a deep scratch and its edges rather than surface flaking; but however hard one looks, there is really no sign of any part of a lost **æ** rune here, and it seems impossible that a full vertical main stave has been completely excised. Similarly, we cannot reject the two parallel by-staves that form rune 2: **æ** as identified above as illusory. However, a possible case for reading **l** here would be that, having cut the first by-stave too high to be completely clear, the rune-carver put in that by-stave again, lower down, at a level at which he or she would then locate the by-staves on the three following runes. It would have been obvious that this would have misleadingly produced an **æ** rune instead of the hypothetically intended **l**, but if the remainder of the inscription did clearly read **+æþe-flæd**, it can be argued that this would not have been problematic. This solution involves a series of assumptions that can be regarded as rendering it altogether unlikely, but perhaps it cannot be ruled out entirely.

3.3   The Wider Context of the Elsted Inscription

In contrast to Sedgeford's *Biarnferþ*, we do not even know what exactly the name of Elsted's *Þ– æflæd* was. Nor does she have much of a historical or archaeological context, although the immediate area in which the inscription was lost and ultimately found again, within the Sussex Weald, is not completely blank in those terms. Close to the Elsted to the south-west is Harting Beacon, a small Bronze- or Iron-age hilltop defensive enclosure with a bowl barrow funerary monument. Human bone retrieved from the barrow has been radiocarbon dated to the later Anglo-Saxon period, and a small hoard of five pennies of Æthelræd II (AD 978–1016) was found separately within the hillfort (Bedwin 1977). The scientific determination of the age of the human skeletal remains is not particularly precise, giving a date of cal AD 764–1017 at 89.5% probability using the current international standard calibration curve IntCal13 (HAR-2207: radiocarbon age 1150±70 BP; D. Jordan, Haddon-Rees and Bayliss 1994: 73). Bedwin (1977: 229) seems to have assumed this had been a furnished grave which had been robbed, as the bones were found "in a heap" and appeared "to have been thrown back into the west end of the grave". In the absence of any more determinative evidence, one may suspect that these remains of an adult male represent an execution burial on the prehistoric site, while the re-use of hillforts in the Æthelrædian period is well attested (Williams 2003: 84). A little further to the south-west is the important excavated early Anglo-Saxon rural settlement of Chalton Down (Addyman, Leigh and Hughes 1972; Addyman and Leigh 1973), but that is really too early to provide any relevant context for the inscribed strap-end.

There is a second strap-end with a runic inscription from southern England, provenanced only to the Isle of Wight, apparently of similar date to the Elsted find (BM Online: 1999,0401.1). This too has lost the split end through which it would have been attached to a strap, and in this case it appears to have been deliberately cut down and curated. The surviving piece is just over 39mm long and 3.5mm wide. The metal is copper alloy. It is parallel sided, and carries plain linear interlace on the upper face. The animal head terminal includes two tiny glass insets to form the eyes. Within Thomas's classification it would appear to be a cut-down

representative of Class B Type 5. The runes on the back run the opposite direction than on the Elsted strap-end, towards the animal-head terminal. There are several matters of uncertainty in the identification of the runes; after having examined the piece on several different occasions, however, I would suggest the following as the most plausible transliteration:

] n æ l | | g æ u æ w æ u o l æ |:| d |

The double vertical lines appear to represent some sort of break – conceivably word-division – in the text, especially as the second of these has two dots inside it, and a single line seems likely to mark the end. Between the **l** and the **g**, however, it would be possible to read **i i**, and at the end **d i**, or even **d͡m**, either of which could be expanded to read some form of the word *dominus*/*domini*, '[of] the Lord'. The remainder of the inscription is, unfortunately, indecipherable. Gabor Thomas was able to collate rather limited evidence on the use of strap-ends, which appears to have been as diverse as one could imagine rather than significantly limited (Thomas 2000: 261–282). It does catch attention, however, that the inscribed strap-ends from Elsted and the Isle of Wight may both be cases where the object was functionally decommissioned by the removal of the attachment end but still preserved for posterity. It is at present impossible to say, in the case of the Isle of Wight example, if that were because of what the inscription was understood to mean, or simply because of some extra value attached to the presence of the inscription itself.[3]

4   The Significance of the Two Finds

Around the mid-ninth century, two individuals in different parts of England had their names inscribed on artefacts in the runic script. One was male, one female. Each name was preceded by a symbol which asserted the Christianity of the individual – that he or she was baptised, and that the name was therefore known to God. There is nothing to suggest that these names were those of the makers or inscribers of the artefacts, and we can infer in consequence that these persons were those who were in possession of the artefacts in question. That would not, of course, preclude literate individuals, male or female, from inscribing their own names on such objects. Although it is usual to think of personal names as familiar features of inscriptions – both runic and roman – in the Early Middle Ages, such "owners' names" are not in fact particularly common: from England we have just a few, all dated towards the later Anglo-Saxon Period from the ninth to eleventh centuries (see, e.g., Backhouse et al. 1984: 109–111 no. 105, The Sutton/Isle of Ely disc brooch; *DOE* s.v. *āgan*, 1.A.2.f.i.). The connections between individuals such as Biarnferþ and the semi-anonymous woman whose strap-end ended up in the ground near Elsted in Sussex and these objects are a matter of considerable interpretative significance. Archaeology is essentially concerned with the relationship between the human population and the items that make up its material culture, whatever the context. It is crucial to recognize, and indeed to stress, that concepts of ownership and possession of material items are historically highly variable and far from universal in character. One may be

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[3] In January 2019 a further silver strap-end of the same Middle Anglo-Saxon Period (broadly the eighth and ninth centuries) inscribed with runes on both sides was reported under the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS: SUR-4A9C55). This also has the attachment end largely removed. It was found in southern Hampshire, west of Winchester. Further technically aided examination is needed to clarify details of the inscription itself, although it seems plausible that it contains a maker's inscription. The clustering of three inscribed strap-ends in a circumscribed area of southern England is interesting.

in possession of an artefact that in a significant way is actually owned by someone else, a wider group, or some other institution; even ownership is often unlikely to entail complete freedom to dispose of an object by sale, gift or destruction, or to do anything one chose with it purely at will. The Anglo-Saxon Period as a whole saw a major transition from a relatively collective system of endowment with property to an increasing level of private ownership, with concomitant phenomena of social inequality and control in relation to material goods. All items of the kind discussed here, however minor the cases may seem on their own, will contribute to understanding of how such changes progressed.

The examples of objects inscribed with personal names analysed and discussed above cannot be regarded merely as instances of a traditional form of vernacular literacy having overlapped with the practical material life of ninth-century Anglo-Saxon England in a limited but essentially casual and random way. These personal name inscriptions are not ostentatious or display forms of script. One is on the plain back of the object, the face of which is elegantly if simply decorated. Biarnferþ's name is certainly more conspicuous on the Sedgeford handle, but the lettering is still only 4–5mm high at most: the equivalent of 16-point capitals in most modern fonts. The objects themselves, however, are very special in the case of the rare spoon handle from Sedgeford – if, of course, it is correctly identified – and fairly special too in the case of the ornamented silver strap-end from Elsted. Implicitly, therefore, Biarnferþ and Þ–æflǣd were also relatively special people. Biarnferþ was not, so far as we can tell, of the uppermost echelons of either the secular or the ecclesiastical elite: e.g. a king or a bishop. It is possible that he was a long-serving, senior priest in one of the most important ecclesiastical centres in the whole of England. Þ–æflǣd may or may not have been a religious: a nun, conceivably even an abbess. Any special position she enjoyed in her lifetime will certainly have depended in some way upon her family background and connections: possibly the daughter of an elite family from the higher free ranks who became a nun; or such a daughter who became the wife of someone of similar rank, and could then in time have become a widow, and then too gone into the religious state. These are credible outline biographies we can sketch out for her even without knowing her full name, and while remaining puzzled about her background as represented by what appears to have been an unusual name in England.

The discovery of these inscriptions means that both of these individuals have flickered momentarily on to the historical stage as bit-part players. And yet it is significant that literacy was a facility that did not just allow that to happen (the 'casual' hypothesis) but rather was a condition that *made* it happen: a 'generative' hypothesis, attributing significant 'agency' to literacy. In some respects, the former can be likened, in contemporary terms, to the agency of modern social media and the associated apparatus represented by a flash of mobile phone or CCTV video recording which momentarily and accidentally snatches someone out of obscurity and places them before a large viewing public. In the Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon Period literacy was becoming an increasingly substantial and influential part of the world of individuals such as these two, and – even if it was through an amanuensis, which is by no means certain – both of them engaged with that process. The wider context of literacy and textual culture has been fundamental to our analysis and interpretation of the inscriptions through, for instance, the minuscule script form of the letter *thorn* in the Elsted inscription, and the series of texts that allow us to explain the form of Biarnferþ's name and even, exceptionally, to postulate that this individual may be an already historically recorded character, belonging primarily to a particular time and place. To return to the analogy of the world contemporary to us, every time any one of us signs something we become, in a way, a historical character – or develop our own historical characters through our 'paper-trail', physical or digital. In the

twenty-first century such aspects of material and textual character are for the most part extremely commonplace and utterly banal. But it was not so in ninth-century England.[4]

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[4] I wish especially to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the late David Williams, Finds Liaison Officer for Surrey, who died suddenly towards the end of 2017, for his hard work and expertise in recording and understanding finds of the Anglo-Saxon and many other periods, particularly in south-eastern England. Grateful thanks, too, to his colleague in Norfolk, Andrew Rogerson; to Robert Nedoma and Gaby Waxenberger for discussion of the form and contents of the inscriptions; to Gabor Thomas for his views on the Elsted strap-end; and to Simon Keynes for practical guidance in relation to the Kentish charters referred to here. Finally, I record with pleasure my appreciation of valuable comments and suggestions from the referees who read the article in its first submitted form and the journal editors.

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